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2013

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Martin, Robyn S., "Mapping a Semester: Using Cultural Mapping in an Honors Humanities Course" (2013). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 223.

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Mapping a Semester: Using Cultural Mapping in an Honors Humanities Course

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On a bright August day in 2012, a select group of honors students and a small group of faculty gathered in a classroom at Northern Arizona University. Most of us were strangers to each other. Certainly none of the students, who traveled from other universities around the country, knew each other, yet we were all soon to become a tight-knit group devoted to an entire semester of place-based, experiential learning. That late summer day marked the beginning of orientation for the Grand Canyon Semester (GCS), the third to be offered by the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and Northern Arizona University (NAU).

Grand Canyon Semesters are integrated learning experiences in the humanities and sciences. Students study the environmental and social challenges confronting us in the twenty-first century using an interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum. During previous semesters, participants have tackled complex issues such as how to balance environmental protection of Grand Canyon National Park while still meeting the needs of over five million visitors each year. Past GCS students have also, in an outdoor classroom experience, excavated and stabilized centuries-old cultural sites in the park while learning about the rights of indigenous peoples whose ancestors have lived in the Grand Canyon for thousands of years. This semester, students enrolled in the latest GCS examined and charted water's economic, political, artistic, ecological, social, and spiritual forces in both the classroom and the field, focusing specifically on the Greater Grand Canyon Region ("Grand Canyon Semester").

An integral part of our curriculum for the semester was to use Place as Text, a method of learning created by Bernice Braid (Braid and Long). This method combines active learning in which the student, not the faculty member, is the primary agent; it also employs an expanded idea of "text," the material that is the focus of study and analysis. Active learning emphasizes the idea of charting or "mapping" experiences. Place as Text principles must include an integrated, collaborative learning approach as well as "the complementary values of autonomy and community that determine the ultimate success of the educational process itself, regardless of any specific content or methodology" (Daniel 12).

MAPPING A SEMESTER

GCS courses reflected this method of integrated and collaborative learning, with faculty drawn from different disciplines across the curriculum. As a GCS faculty member, I taught a humanities and aesthetics course called *Writing the Canyon*. The curriculum offered samplings from Greater Grand Canyon-specific art, literature, poetry, and music. Students were required to write and reflect on their own observations using course material that they read (or a piece of art they had considered). They drew from their experiences, in both the field and classroom, over the course of the semester and integrated their reflections through in-class discussions, personal journaling, online responses, peer-review writing workshops, and short essays. However, instead of a traditionally formal end-of-semester paper assignment, I asked students to create a “cultural map” of sorts with accompanying interpretation. This assignment gave students a chance to chart, in their own ways, complex experiences they captured through observation and reflection over the semester and make sense of them in a unique manner.

Cultural mapping is not a new idea. Every day people use maps of all kinds to define their world. Maps can be powerful tools that tell us what places and experiences are important to a particular culture; maps can also intentionally misrepresent the importance of place to a particular group if that place is omitted from a map, thus weakening the spiritual or emotional significance of a place to the culture, according to Jim Enote, a Zuni Indian and director of the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center in New Mexico (Enote and McClarran). Enote was inspired to create his Zuni Mapping Project, a series of different paintings that, under Enote’s direction, Zuni artists have crafted to represent the many culturally sacred places in their own world. Using Enote’s cultural mapping idea, I drafted an assignment that asked students to create their own end-of-semester cultural map, combining their unique perspectives and experiences in a creative and personal manner that told their own story.

We began the assignment with a general discussion of maps: what they do, what they do not do, and how and why maps might oppress as well as empower a group. Foundation readings on cultural mapping followed, and throughout each class I continued to ask students to consider how the course samplings mapped a particular aspect of the Grand Canyon region as well as the unique stories of the authors.

I also included a collaborative in-class cultural mapping exercise that asked students to first individually draft a map of the Greater Grand Canyon region and then add to it geological, geographical, and cultural resources that they deemed important to their semester’s experience. They could make these map notations bigger or smaller, colorful or not, depending on their importance. They could, but did not have to, label the notations or use the colored pencils, paper, watercolors, and markers I provided for them. This exercise was simply an entry point to introduce the idea that maps can tell profound stories of others as well as themselves. They were also asked, as they made these initial maps, to informally capture the following on paper:

- why the particular elements of their own map were important;
- what their favorite form of “writing” was (poetry/short stories, essays, journals, painting/sketching, sculpture, songs, videos, or other multi-media projects); and
- how they might translate their findings into a mapping project that reflected their Grand Canyon Semester experience.

We followed with a class discussion, comparing our choices and talking about what surprised students and what did not in our comparisons: why one student included this particular place or experience, for example, while another student chose to leave it out. The goal of this exercise was to remind them to consider their own stories and the lessons they had learned during the GCS and to provide a way for them to take these lessons back to their home colleges to share. Next we integrated these experiences into something tangible they could reflect on and take home when the semester ended. Last, we displayed some of the finished products in a studio setting during our First Friday Art Walk Celebration in downtown Flagstaff, an evening gathering that closed out the Grand Canyon Semester.

On that last night, the final maps highlighted our students’ creativity and allowed them to share what they had learned with a larger audience. For example, several students painted “ammo cans”—waterproof metal boxes used on river rafting trips—having been introduced to this equipment during our Colorado River rafting trip mid-semester. Those who chose to paint cans included places and symbols meaningful to them from the Greater Grand Canyon region. Some students wallpapered the interior of their box with significant scenes and symbols while others placed in their boxes meaningful found objects they had collected on field trips. One student created a book with a series of individual pen-and-ink sketches detailing a favorite place; the sketches could be flipped up from their mountings, revealing a short handwritten description about the place and why the artist chose to include it. Still another student chose to fill a small, handmade paper cylinder with rolled lines of poetry chosen from her personal journal and kept throughout the semester. One student created a Grand Canyon board game, complete with playing board and rules. Finally, one student read an essay that made a “map” of his experience via the written word, and two students collaborated on writing and performing a song that not only captured their own GCS experience but seemed to embody, collectively, the group experience as well.

The students were also required to submit, along with the completed creative piece, a formal essay that interpreted their project for others. The essay prompt asked them to explain why they chose their particular method of delivery for their map project, to explain their map’s particular characteristics, and to relate these characteristics to their semester’s learning experiences: what was important to them and why, what was left out and why, and how their cultural map would serve to remind them of their own semester story found within their reflections and observations.

Overall, this cultural mapping assignment, brand new to me and to my students, was a resounding success. It allowed students a hands-on way to collaborate with each other and share their collaboration with a larger community via an art show. It allowed students, using their unique gifts and perspectives, to reflect on and capture their personal honors experience. The assignment supported, in a creative and student-driven way, the methodology of Place as Text, which emphasizes “mapping” and integrating unique experiences to achieve fresh and lasting learning outcomes. With adjustments, this cultural mapping assignment can be integrated into other place-based curricula offered in honors programs throughout the United States, allowing honors students a nontraditional way to create and reflect on a physical representation of what they learned over the course of a semester.

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